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Interview with Caitlin Blethen, Growing Gardens, 2009 (audio)

Caitlin Blethen

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Portland State University Oral History Project

Interview Index

INTERVIEWEE: Caitlin Blethen

Interviewer: Kristin Milner

Date: July, 29 2009

Location of Interview: Coffee shop near offices of Growing Gardens Organization, Portland Oregon

Research Assistant: Sarah Roecker

Interview Series: SUSTAINING NORTHWEST LANDSCAPES & COMMUNITIES

Recording Equipment: DIGITAL RECORDER (WINDOWS MEDIA AUDIO FILE) WITH AN EXTERNAL, OMNIDIRECTIONAL MICROPHONE

Time	Notes
Part 1	
:01	When you Start the Interview introduction portion
:23	Q: Caitlin, do I have your permission to record this interview?
:27	A: Yes
Part 2	
:01	Q: Where were you born and raised?
:05	A: Bellingham, WA
:07	Q: How long have you lived in Portland?
:11	A: About 5 years
:15	Q: What brought you here to Portland?
:19	A: Liked the active people in Portland and very open to green, alternative living
:40	Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your educational background?
:46	A: Has a BA in Ecological, Agriculture, and Community Development from Evergreen State College from 1999
:59	Q: Tell us little bit about how you got involved with Growing Gardens.
1:04	A: Had been running and working with youth garden programs for several years. She had been teaching garden principles to youth through the WSU extension in Clark County. She also ran a gardening program that was a partnership between 4-H and Clark County Juvenile Court

Time	Notes
1:57	Q: Do you feel like it was more challenging to work with those kids versus the kids you work with now?
2:04	A: No. Kids are kids. It was more teenagers with the Clark County Juvenile Court and now she works more with elementary age students.
2:28	Q: What aspect of Youth Grow do you feel most passionate about?
2:35	A: Changing attitudes and working to change the environment. To give kids to be healthier.
2:52	Q: What aspects do you find most challenging?
	A: Teaching kids about healthy eating in a culture where there is not a lot of support for that.
3:41	Q: How do you or Growing Gardens as a company or organization define sustainability?
3:48	A: Depends on what you are talking about. Overall sustainability is to not use up more resources for generations in the future so that they are able to survive with what they need. One aspect for Youth Grow as far as sustainability is to help set up school food gardens that aren't reliant on one agency to keep them going. So they can survive into the future while reduce the impact on earth.
5:03	Q: Do you have a system in place or a measure that you use to assess the progress the progress towards sustainability in terms of Growing Gardens or Youth Grow?
5:17	A: They set up a 3 year plan to help set up the school and school community to help integrate the garden into their school. Also providing curriculum and creating a model for the school partnership.
6:16	Q: Where do you see room for improvement at Growing Gardens in terms of sustainability?
6:24	A: Keeping up their capacity to keep up the partnerships they have to the best of their ability. Having a limited staff is a challenge which can use help.
7:03	Q: You talked about wanting the Youth Grow programs to be long term and it seems like that's a goal for the other side of Growing Gardens the home gardens. Is that a challenge in home gardens programs as well in terms of wanting these people to be able to grow their gardens long term? You do the 3 years with them as well too right?
7:46	A: The goals are similar in some ways. But home gardens is empowering people to grow food at their own home.
8:33	Q: What are some of the main hindrances to the growth or expansion of the Youth Grow program?
8:40	A: Their own capacity is the main reason
9:04	Q: So at this point you are kind of at your full capacity and to be able to expand is that a financial issue or is it more complicated?
9:16	A: Partially financial. They have generated a school garden coordinator training so instead of Growing Gardens, these coordinators work with the schools which is one way they have been able to expand.
9:53	Q: So what are some of the positive and negative aspects of having an organization that relies on volunteers?
10:01	A: Positive are the fabulous people. Negative are being able to harness all of their many talents and keeping them engaged with their organization.

Time	Notes
10:37	Q: How do you maintain a steady supply of volunteers?
10:43	A: Monthly volunteer newsletter. Through outreach events and through their website people learn about their organization and join.
11:38	Q: What are your goals for the Youth Grow program in the next 5 years, 10 years, and even more long term than that?
11:47	A: More schools gaining gardens.
12:58	Q: In your experience, what are some of the most significant benefits of a school garden?
13:05	A: Learning laboratory for every subject that is taught. And creating excitement among the students to see where their food comes from. And parents see the garden as a way to get involved at their child's school.
13:53	Q: You mentioned earlier one of the challenges is trying to teach these kids about gardening and healthy foods when the culture all around them is unhealthy. When you work with these kids long term are you seeing real, tangible benefits – are you seeing them choosing the fresh vegetables when they have that option – are you seeing them become healthier or maybe lose weight or do you feel like it's more like planting a seed with them?
14:27	A: She tells a wonderful story about students at a school and serving the food they grew.
16:25	Q: How do you engage the children that you are working with in these programs with a lasting effect?
16:35	A: Easy with bugs, insects, worms, seeds, and hands on activities. There are tasks and games they do. Harvesting and taste what they are growing is also pretty powerful.
17:45	Q: Based on my research, I understand that there are numerous benefits to community gardens. So I am wondering why aren't there more of them in our cities. In your opinion why might this be so and what's holding us back?
18:02	A: From the standpoint of school gardens, some of the challenges in having a garden is that it needs to be maintained year round. And school gardens are not mandated by schools, there is no set national curriculum for school gardens.
19:33	Q: Is that something that you would like to see changed? Do you think it would be helpful for the government to step in and make policies about every school having a school garden or something like that?
19:48	A: Policy would be very helpful. And having the funding to back it.
20:43	Q: In what ways have you found it economically efficient to feed the hungry the food from urban gardens?
20:54	A: Enable people and give them access to be able to provide food for themselves.
21:22	Q: We have reached the end of my questions. Is there anything else you would like to share or any other stories you would like us to know about?
21:33	A: If anyone listening wants to learn more to visit their website at www.growing-gardens.org . There is a great video about them on this website.